

Social Media – changing the world from the edge?

by Christina Merl¹

Joitske Hulsebosch is an organisational adviser with a special focus on communities of practice and social media² in support of learning processes. She tells RDN how social media can support her work in Kenya, Mali, Ethiopia and Ghana.



Joitske, tell me about your professional background and third world experience.

I graduated as an irrigation engineer and have always worked on issues of organisation/cooperation. Starting with support for water users association and credit cooperation in Kenya, I continued to work on strengthening organisations and federations in Mali. Then I joined CRDA, an umbrella organisation of NGOs in Ethiopia and advised them how to organise and shape their programme to build the capacity of local NGOs.

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² Social media defines the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words, pictures, videos and audio. This interaction, and the manner in which information is presented, depends on the varied perspectives and “building” of shared meaning, as people share their stories, and understandings. Social media can take many different forms, including Internet forums, message boards, weblogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures and video. Technologies include: blogs, picture-sharing, vlogs, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowdsourcing, and voice over IP, to name a few. (Wikipedia)

In Ghana, I worked to strengthen NGOs, government institutions and networks, as well as facilitated multi-stakeholder processes to create synergy to solve societal problems such as illegal gold mining. While working for IICD in the Netherlands, I have supported a network of ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) practitioners and policy makers in Ghana. So most of my work has been around providing support to organisations and networks.

How do the four categories you work in – organisational learning, CoP (Community of Practices), online interaction, serious creativity – cross-fertilise?

That’s a nice question because I’m still figuring that out myself. Somehow, they often come together. CoPs can be an important vehicle to foster organisational learning in domains that are crucial for the organisation. More and more, online interaction can help CoP members to connect just in time. And both CoPs and online tools can be a means to foster creativity and innovation. I say can, because they are not tools for innovation by nature but can be used by skilled facilitators to serve this purpose. It is like the hammer that is the tool for a skilled carpenter to make a nice table, but a hammer in my hands would still yield a terrible table. As a hammer won’t produce a nice table, a community of practice doesn’t necessarily yield innovation.

What are your goals for using social media in support of your work?

I like social media because of their easy accessibility and flexibility. For example, you can create a Ning platform without a budget and members can connect with each other and discuss topics that are of interest to them. Anyone can start a weblog and be heard (as long as their ideas and reflections are interesting enough). Therefore, I would like to raise awareness; more people should know about the possibilities

offered by social media and use them to support their own learning process.

How can social media support learning processes?

There are many ways in which social media can support learning processes. They can support individual learning, team learning, organisational learning and cross-organisational learning via networks and communities of practice. For example, my own learning process is supported by blogging. I blog about what interests me and read blogs of people in knowledge management. That keeps me thinking and developing my own ideas. An important mindset of people participating in the online exchange in social media is to be comfortable with having intimate conversations in public spaces. That means those conversations are opened up to be listened to. Likewise, listening into other circles helps you to understand the world, broaden your view and learn about your interests and unexpected things. I tend to believe that social media will change learning processes of professionals in organisations and allow for more cross-fertilization of ideas. Furthermore, it is much easier to network online through social media. I had two old friends from Ghana and Mali on a Skype chat this morning. If we didn't have Skype, I would probably lose touch. One of them helped me to find a water expert in Mali for a friend working with OXFAM in the US. The barrier to ask questions and help each other is very low. However, the basis for such contact via social media is often still face-to-face contacts.

Can you tell a social media success story, maybe in a third world context?

This is a bit tricky since the success stories start to spread and there is always another side to a success story. I would like to share a story though – just to illustrate the use of social media. The network I worked with in Ghana is called GINKS (www.ginks.org). The secretariat wanted to do more with audio-visuals as that works quite well in Ghana, compared to text. Staff members were trained in video making by a professional trainer. The process was so cumbersome that they managed to produce only one film, and it was more than an hour long. When I explained them how to use a weblog and combine that with uploading

short videos to blip.tv (a similar service to youtube), they were very happy and were able to film, edit and upload videos within 2-3 hours time. You can see it at <http://ginks.blogspot.com>. Though only people with high bandwidth and people abroad are able to watch these videos – one could also download them on CD-ROM and display them offline – they got very positive feedback from high-ranking government officials. This example shows that social media will not do the work for you. You still have to build your network and have interesting content. Nevertheless, social media can help build your reputation. Government officials may not have time to attend network meetings but they may have time to watch online videos.

Which specific aspects do advisers need to consider when they use social media in a third world context?

I think you always need to make sure about Internet access and bandwidth. Don't assume but ask, as people can also underestimate access to the Internet ('that's not possible'). When we did a survey for the ICT4D trainers' community, I was surprised about the relatively good access that the group had. Apart from that I think you have to find the added value in using social media. When you do that together with the people, you cannot go wrong. Start by asking what experience people already have – don't assume they are at zero. It can also be useful to involve the pioneers, as mentioned above.

Do you think this is true for any (third world) country or are cultural differences to be taken into account?

I think if you try to understand the social media experience of people and offer examples, they can start to experiment the tools and adopt them to their specific use. I think most of the tools can be used in a manner that suits the group. 'Culture' is not embedded in the tools but can be created by the users. For instance, you can create a culture in which you can skype IM (Skype Instant Message) someone directly or not, or a culture in which you only skype by appointment etc. Or you greet each other online -- I noticed that my Ghanaian skype contacts use the skype IM just to say hello to me or to crack a joke, whereas my Dutch contacts never do that.

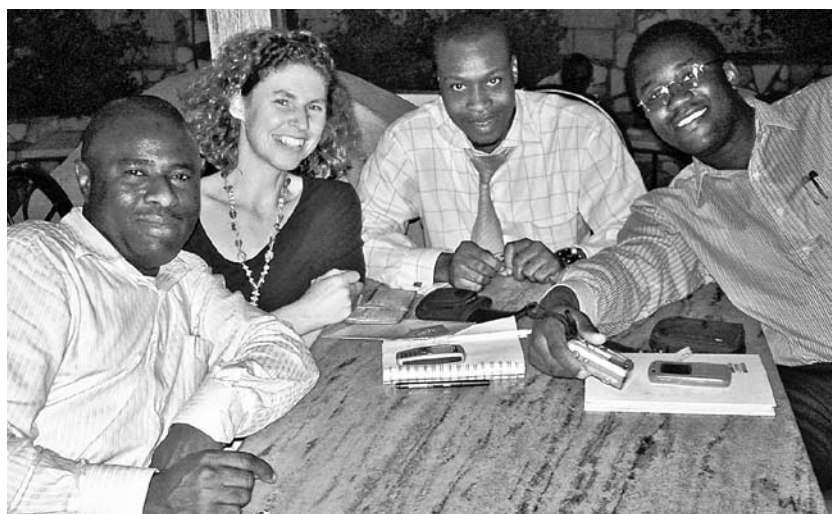
Is there a difference between developing countries and developed countries when it comes to the use of social media?

Another difficult question! Naturally, social media work much better with broadband connections. There is of course a massive difference in the percentage of people with access to broadband in developing and developed countries. For example, in the Netherlands 95% of the people using internet use search engines, only 30% participate in online forums or use VOIP (Voice Over IP, f.ex. Skype, CBS, 2008). This is to say that social media are also comparatively new in the Netherlands. I know there are pioneers in developing countries. I know a number of Ghanaians who blog and twitter³. In terms of numbers, the number of users of social media is much lower than in developed countries. There are special social media targeting developing countries like the 'African Facebook' <http://www.woffa.com/yearbook/home.php>. Or have a look at Africa's web2.0 websites compiled here: <http://whiteafrican.com/?p=805>

Some staff members who work for nonprofits say that they have difficulty convincing people in their organizations about the value of social media. Have you made a similar experience?

I would not say it is difficult to convince people, though I do find people are sceptical. Maybe the difference is that I don't try to convince people, I try to provide examples of how other professionals or other organisations use social media. That stimulates their imagination of what's possible and may trigger their curiosity. If it doesn't I think it's fine, too. I don't think social media is for everyone, and not every tool is for everyone. However, most people do get curious when they find out there is a whole world out there they don't know about.

³ (twitter.com) = a free social networking and micro-blogging service that allows users to send "updates"



Joitske with two Ghanaians from the secretariat of GINKS network and Emmanuel K. Bensah, one of the most prominent Ghanaian bloggers.

What do you think are the major obstacles in working with social media in a third world and/or non-profit context?

I think that may be linked to the social media assumption of having broadband access. Delicious⁴ can become very annoying with a dial-up connection. For the rest, there may be people who lose control/influence by social media tools and they may not like it. But that's the same in developed countries.

How can social media help to share relevant knowledge – can you tell a kind of breakthrough experience?

A breakthrough experience... I believe in the combination of social media supporting existing networks or communities of practice. Though networks may start or expand by means of social media, too. A breakthrough experience for myself was when I met Beth Kanter in an online workshop. We had common interests in social media and developing countries (she does some work in Cambodia). Though we hardly mail, I know what she is doing through her blog and twitter. Through Beth I got to know the nptech social bookmarking group, and I'm following the nptech

⁴ (<http://del.icio.us/>) = a social bookmarking web service for storing, sharing, and discovering web bookmarks. Del.icio.us uses a non-hierarchical keyword categorization system in which users can tag each of their bookmarks with a number of freely chosen keywords. (Wikipedia)

resources through my RSS feed. I often find interesting resources that I tag and use for my work later. I used some of her training resources, too. Another example is the wikipedia in local languages project in Ghana. When we had that idea I subscribed to the yahoo group on afrophone wikipedia and was able to quickly grasp the main issues.

In how far are you engaged in the knowledge management for development?

I enjoy the knowledge management for development list a lot. I think the km4dev (knowledge management for development) community has one of the best on-line discussion groups I have seen so far. When people ask a question they always get various responses. I participate in discussions when they are relevant to me and read most of the threads. I don't go to the meetings they organize in Lisbon. I'm not a member of the steering group either but have written articles for the km4dev journal.

Can social media improve teamwork, also in a third world context? If so, how?

We just wrote an article in Dutch about this topic, from the perspective of global teamwork. We stated at the end that using social media can change your perception on what's possible and improve teamwork. For instance, by using a variety of media that draws out the best of all team members, by inviting experts from a different part of the world, etc.

Have you taken any effort to measure the success of social media?

I have not measured the success of social media, but I have measured the success of communities of practice or networks using social media. I think it does not matter so much what tools they use, as long as they are effective networks or communities (or teams for that matter). I do monitor the use of social media through traffic and comments.

One usually has to invest a lot (of time...) in social media. Do you get back what you invest?

For me, it does lead to new ideas, I learn and I expand my network. I think you do have to balance it, I don't invest a lot of time in www.facebook.com, for instance. When you are new, it helps to have an

experienced person to guide you. There is a nice blogpost about the time web2.0 takes. You can find it here: <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2008/04/how-much-time-does-web-20-take.html>

Is it up to donors, consultants, or non-profit staff to find creative ways to get resources for social media, and to integrate the tools into their work and organisations?

What I like about social media is that you can start experimenting at no cost! You can start your own weblog at no cost, start social bookmarking or start a facebook group. All without any costs. So I'd say experiment before you really invest. There may be a particular need or reason to develop something in-house or to take a subscription but make use of the free versions to experiment. Otherwise, I think it is up to the owner of the idea to find resources. I don't think that's the real problem. In the open source community, you can find people who can help develop new applications as well (though open source is not necessarily equivalent to free, you may have to pay a consultant, too).

How can you best motivate community members in a developing country to use social media?

I think my approach works well, show a wide range of applications used elsewhere to inspire people to come up with ideas. However, at times you may need a stronger role while introducing social media and repeatedly emphasize the usefulness because it is all so new to people. Nancy White has a great reflection on the introduction of a wiki in the km4dev community. You can find it here: <http://www.fullcirc.com/wp/2008/03/16/harvesting-knowledge-from-text-conversations/>

What's the next important development step in social media?

Good question! Even though I believe you can use most existing tools for a wide range of purposes, I am a fan of specific applications developed in interaction with people in developing countries. Probably the special applications would be tailored to needs, whether expressed needs or tacit needs. My dream is a social network for NGOs in the south where they can discuss and network on resource mobilisation, grant making, and donor issues.